

DeWeese sold on Camas

Retired salesman continues to sell love of community

By SANDRA WALTERS
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He started out in search of work from his home in West Virginia in 1932 with a couple of buddies and ended up being a well known businessman in a small town called Camas.

Selvy DeWeese set out across the country when he was 22 in hopes of finding employment after the stock market crash of the late 1920's.

"The crash led me out here looking for work along the Lincoln Highway, starting in Chicago and heading west, in an old car with my friends," DeWeese, 83, said.

The trio finally found work picking fruit in Napa Valley, Calif.

"We worked for a \$1 a day in the cherry orchards or in the vineyards," he said recalling the distant past. "I had never seen fruit like it—we ate most of what we picked. It was the first time I had ever been so far from West Virginia."

DeWeese said eventually the group made enough money to start for home in their 1928 Ford Touring car. As they made their way home they ended up on the highway to Crater Lake and then progressed into Redmond and Bend, Ore.

"I saw all the ranches all around us as we drove," DeWeese said. "I told my friends I would get out of the car where we were at and look for work on one of the ranches. Well, I walked 10 miles from Redmond to Pineville and asked for a job."

DeWeese landed a job digging a swimming pool and got paid a \$1 a day. However, he didn't have enough money for a room.

"The local police were nice to me and said I could sleep under the fire bell in a little shanty they had built around it," he said. "The shanty and fire bell were as high as a telephone pole. I climbed up it and slept there a few nights."

He got another job as a hay hand in the area stacking 100 ton hay stacks. After awhile, he moved on up to Portland with another fellow.

"A lot of things happened to me in a year's time," DeWeese said. "I left home, came out west and ended up in Camas."

His friend had an interview to be a chef at the Crown Zellerbach Hotel in Camas and DeWeese tagged along the day his friend came to town.

"There were about 200 people standing out in front of the mill because the pay was good that day, 40 cents an hour," he said. "Well, I was walking in and tripped over a chair, I didn't see at all, and landed in front of Vick Gualt's office. I was so embarrassed, there were some young women looking for secretarial jobs and I had landed on the floor."

"Gualt looked up at the ceiling and said, 'Where in the hell did you drop in from.' I told him I was sorry and started for the door when he started asking about where I came from and if I was looking for work."

After saying he hoped to work for the mill, Gualt gave him an application to fill out.

"He told me to put it under my shirt and go, fill it out and he'd give me work. I was kind of afraid by what he meant by he'd give me work," DeWeese said laughing. "He and I got to be good friends."

In 1935 DeWeese met Mildred, who managed the Sprouse Reitz store in town for many years, and married her later that year. He helped with the stores remodeling project in 1938, before World War II.

In 1942 DeWeese got drafted into World War II, but only went as far as the Kaiser Shipyards. During his five years at the shipyards, he studied the building of naval ships and was involved in marine engineering.

"I studied ships day and night," he said. "I had to make sure the engine propellers and boilers were ready to be put in as soon as possible. We built over 200 ships, such as landing crafts and troop transports, during the war."

After the war he worked as the manager of Sprouse Reitz and took

a great deal of care in setting up displays of merchandise. There even used to be a downstairs area to the store which sold records.

"One day the manager said I was being transferred and had to be in Pendleton (Oregon) to take over the store there, but I told him I don't like Pendleton, only Camas," DeWeese said. "I owned my own home and my daughter was in school. I told him before he fired me for not going to Pendleton, I quit."

Well, it didn't take DeWeese long to find another job, he just walked up the street and bought Bjur Electric, from Lloyd Bjur. The year was 1949. The new store, DeWeese Electric, sold all kinds of appliances.

"We moved a lot of appliances out of that store," he said. "We sold thousands of dollars of merchandise because of the shortage after the war. Can you believe a Frigidaire refrigerator cost \$169.95 or a range was \$169."

In 1959 DeWeese sold out and was a salesman for awhile for Intertherm Heating, worked for a friend selling aluminium siding, and finally worked the accounts receivable for Columbia River Trucking for a couple of years.

"I seemed to fall into a job whether I wanted one or not," he said.

But work wasn't the only activity that kept DeWeese busy. In 1956 he was elected to the Camas-Washougal Port Commission, an agency he helped to start in 1937.

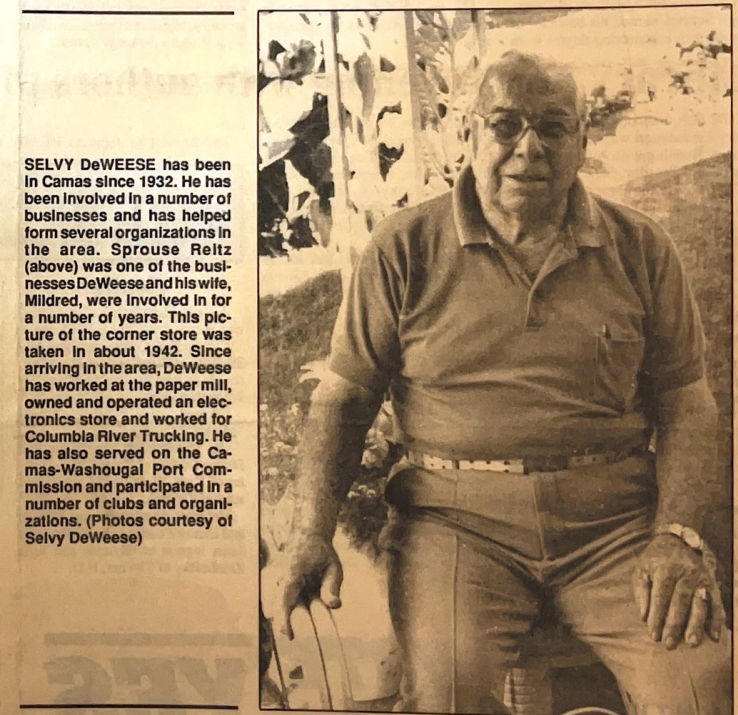
"In 1937 I found out about the money available for a port," he said. "So I handed out fliers about why we needed a port in this area. If it hadn't have been for the Port, we would have been part of Vancouver's port district."

Besides his time with the Port, DeWeese has also been a member of the Kiwanis for 53 years, a club he was instrumental in organizing in the 1940s for the local area.

His other involvements include starting the first softball team in Camas, working to create Crown Park and the list goes on and on.

Today he is the president of the Over 50 Club at Riverside Bowling Alley, which he said could use some more bowlers, and is still active with the Kiwanis.

"Camas is a wonderful town," he said. "It's my home."



SELVY DEWEESE has been in Camas since 1932. He has been involved in a number of businesses and has helped form several organizations in the area. Sprouse Reitz (above) was one of the businesses DeWeese and his wife, Mildred, were involved in for a number of years. This picture of the corner store was taken in about 1942. Since arriving in the area, DeWeese has worked at the paper mill, owned and operated an electronics store and worked for Columbia River Trucking. He has also served on the Camas-Washougal Port Commission and participated in a number of clubs and organizations. (Photos courtesy of Selvy DeWeese)